

PSYCHIC FRIEND

Small town elects gay mayor by Jonathan Kipp

If Don Clarkson's hometown had a newspaper, the front page Nov. 8 would have read, "Gay psychic elected mayor."

Although Mosier's 166 voters didn't get to see that headline, it doesn't mean it isn't true. When Clarkson got the thumbs-up to serve a two-year term Nov. 7, he became Oregon's only out gay mayor.

A resident of the town since 1988, he wasn't involved in local politics. He kept to himself, fixing up his home and commuting twice a week to Portland, where he supports himself as a psychic and a personal coach.

But when the town's Don Clarkson

scrooge stepped up to run unopposed for mayor, Clarkson was approached by several locals about running against him. Bill Ward, a fundamentalist Christian and an Oregon Citizens Alliance sympathizer, sat on the City Council and was considered by many to be an obstructionist—a divisive and mean-spirited person.

Clarkson refused the invitation to run. He didn't want the headache and assumed he would have no chance of winning.

But an elderly woman, one of the town's six council members, continued lobbying him. She didn't like homosexuals, but she liked Clarkson.

Others surprised him by encouraging him to run as well. He tried to fend them off by reminding them that he was gay and that he was a psychic. He was sure many would consider him a sort of "anti-Christ" in an area normally considered a hotbed of conservatism.

But Mosier isn't your normal small town. Clarkson calls it "an odd little place" with some of the most interesting people he ever has known.

The area's weather, world-famous windsurfing and slow pace have attracted people from throughout the country—some from big cities and some affluent. And the newcomers brought along their diverse and more liberal views, which Clarkson said were more open to his candidacy.

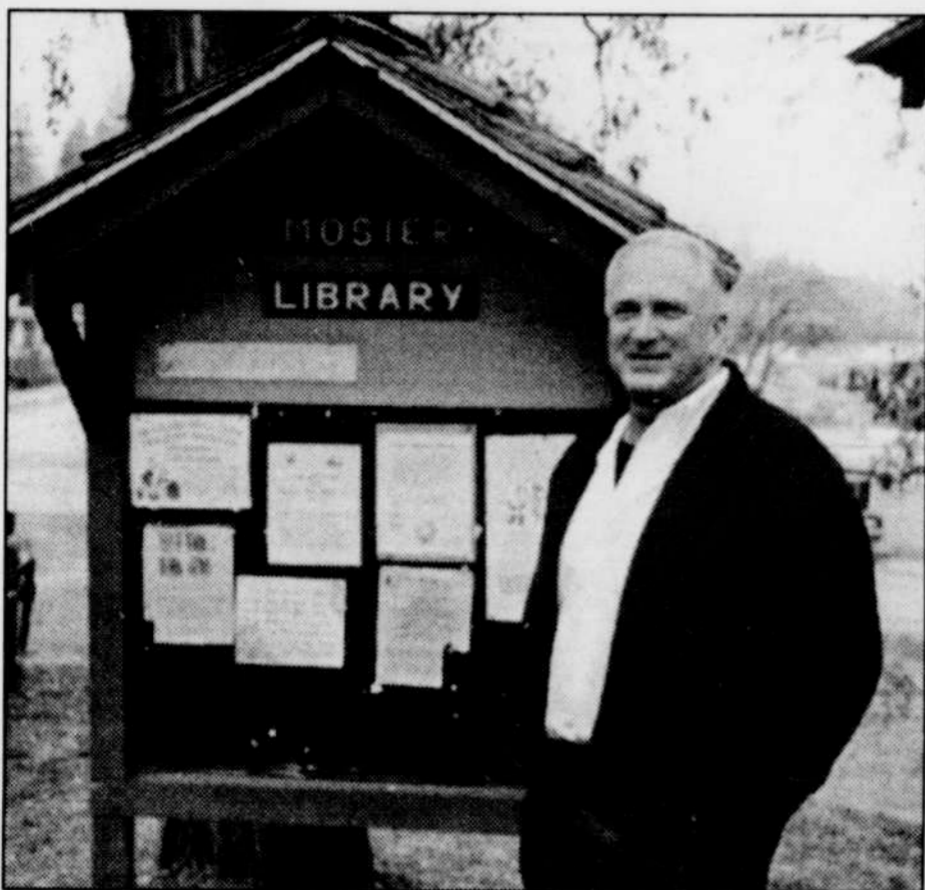
Eventually, the most unlikely candidate in the area stepped up and put his name on the ballot. It was a sort of turning point in his life.

Clarkson realized he almost was ashamed of turning his head when big problems arose around him. He was tired of being a "metaphysical pansy"—seeing the bad guy win because he decided to let someone else solve the problems.

He put up signs and sent a campaign letter. Mosier never had a real election, Clarkson said; people usually are elected by default.

But his opponent didn't sit still while the campaign took off. Ward went door to door telling locals about Clarkson's deviant lifestyle and devil worshipping.

And then, five days before the election, he sent out a mailer filled with blatant lies to every voter. Clarkson said that Ward thought his candidacy was a "slam dunk"—after all,



who would vote for a queer psychic in rural Oregon?

For a moment, Clarkson thought it was over. He remembers one of his supporters saying that if he lost, "We're all going to have to move."

But the letter backfired. It was hateful and something even some of Ward's supporters couldn't forgive.

"Even fundamental Christians turned against him," Clarkson says. He figures some who were opposed to a gay psychic for mayor decided Ward was even less of a Christian than he was.

People did express their curiosity about his profession as a psychic, so Clarkson tried to answer their questions. Surprisingly, though, the issue of his sexual orientation didn't come up once during the campaign. "I don't think for the most part anyone cared," he says.

But Clarkson wasn't taking any chances. By running for mayor he went from relative anonymity to being one of the town's most recognized faces.


He got extra security for his home and said he started sleeping with one eye open. He wrote to his clients in his fall quarterly newsletter about his concern that his opponent might be a homophobic loose cannon and have access to a gun.

But he knew his mission was an important one, not only for him but also for his community.

Clarkson defeated Ward, 96 votes to 70. He admits his victory in this little-known hamlet pleases him—and even causes him to gloat a bit.

The proud mayor-elect thinks he will have an opportunity to make a difference for Mosier. He says the area is about to undergo major changes that will require hard work and leadership.

Clarkson also is hoping his position will help change at least a few minds about gay people. He says he hopes to "put a different face to what queer looks like" in the minds of his rural neighbors.

When something unheard of happens—like a gay psychic being elected as mayor of a small Oregon town—it gives cause for hope, Clarkson says. "This is a topsy-turvy world, as it should be." 



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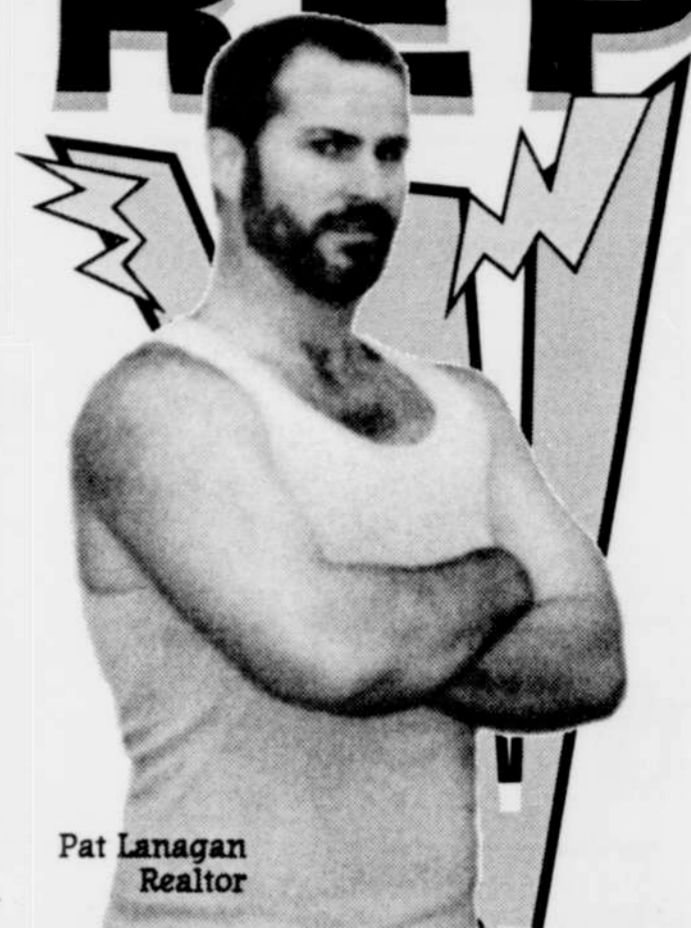
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